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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a 2-year project establishing an interpretive community of field-based teacher researchers and a university-based teacher researcher at four urban preschools in San Francisco, California. The primary research focus of the project is an examination of practical and theoretical connections between current notions of developmentally appropriate curriculum and culturally responsive language and literacy teaching for 2- to 5-year-olds. The paper describes the initial formation of the group and the project focus and implementation, reflects on the teacher research process, and presents implications for strengthening practitioner inquiry in the field of early childhood education. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/KB)

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Abstract

We describe our two-year project on establishing an interpretive community of field-based teacher researchers and a university-based teacher researcher at four urban preschools in San Francisco, California. The project's primary research focus is an examination of practical and theoretical connections between current notions of developmentally appropriate curriculum and culturally responsive language and literacy teaching for children aged 2-5 years of age. The paper describes the initial formation of the group, the project focus and implementation, reflections on the teacher research process, and offers implications for strengthening practitioner inquiry in the field of early childhood education.

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> We are talking about life and the life span of words. We are talking about the deepest sustenance of the human race. We are talking; we are *talking*. If words are the intricate bonds of language, and if the spoken word is the first part of this ancient design, this construction that makes us a family, a tribe, a civilization, we had better strive to understand how and why — and perhaps first of all, *that* — we exist in the element of language.
>
> N. Scott Momaday, The Man Made of Words

Toward a Research Community

Two years ago, when we began our project, we had little idea that we would really be starting a small community of learners, collaborators, thinkers, observers, and talkers. When we began, we thought we were trying

to design and implement a new kind of project for us as teaching professionals, and a new kind of project for the field of early childhood education, which has seen very little in the way of teacher research. As the two years progressed, we grew closer to each other professional and personally, and came to see our teacher research collaboration as based upon the "having of wonderful ideas" (Duckworth, 1996) and Momaday's "the intricate bonds of language."

We have learned, too, that the insights and wonderful moments of our project have hinged on a swirling mixture of "the spoken word" (from our notes on the children's talk and our group conversations), the written word (children's early drawings and writings), and the seen word and reality (photographs of the children at work and play) frozen in time. We have also learned that our project has helped us become an example of Momaday's "family" through language and talk, an albeit temporary but by now comfortable and familiar home for talking and sharing our work with young children. Through this process of socializing ourselves into a family community of teacher researchers, we have also seem important glimpses of models of adult learning as parallel to models of children's learning. The sense of community and family through shared language that we worked toward is also the movement toward a collective sense of social togetherness, shared intellectual inquiry, and partaking of divergent and convergent viewpoints that has made our project both personally and professional valuable.

The Formation of the Group — Preventing Professional Isolation in Early Childhood Education

Outside of advocacy work and professional networking, and recent attention to teacher inquiry from the innovative programs of Reggio Emilia,

Italy (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998), there are currently few formal models for teacher research and practitioner inquiry within the early childhood educational community in the United States. We had two primary goals for establishing our group. First, we wanted to create a small community of teacher researchers focused on improving knowledge and practice in our diverse, local early childhood settings. We were interested in providing a beginning model for our early childhood colleagues in our teaching and research community to initiate their own teacher inquiry efforts, helping to spread professional collaboration and shared conversations about teaching and learning. Second, we wanted to provide ourselves with an organized forum both for exchanging ideas on classroom observation and documentation and for contributing to rethinking views of children's development (e.g., Mallory & New, 1994) through connecting developmentally appropriate (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) and culturally responsive language and literacy teaching (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1994; Delpit, 1995).

In combining these two goals, we wanted to establish the capacity to do research in this critical early childhood area by establishing an organized process for collaborative practitioner inquiry. We wanted to foster an exchange of ideas across public and privately-funded early childhood settings, and establish beginning connections between the diversity of multilingual/multicultural communities represented by the four project sites. The project had the following structural components:
1) regular monthly meetings to share, discuss, and reflect upon our observations, findings, and insights 2) ongoing data collection by each group member of a case study (Merriam, 1998) or portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of children who illustrate and exemplify interesting child-

initiated language and literacy involvement 3) cross-visits to project members' classrooms to observe and collect data on teacher-initiated developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive practices 4) field notes and teaching journals kept by each project member to serve as an ongoing source of teacher reflection and understanding 5) reading and discussing of selected texts and readings chosen by the group to both widen and sharpen our collective research gathering lenses and tools for inquiry and 6) co-authorship of authors and papers and co-presentation of research findings at early childhood workshops, conferences, and in-service staff development.

We also included an assessment plan for meeting the project's original goals at the project's regular meetings and at the project's midpoint and conclusion. At the regular group meetings, we consulted our teaching journals and data from field notes for continual evidence of satisfying original project goals. We placed special emphasis on sharing excerpts from our teacher research materials that pertain both to the content of our research focus and to the collaborative and capacity building nature of our research process. Second, by discussing and examining the case studies and portraits of individual children and the cross-site visits, we assessed how well the project linked data on child-initiated learning and involvement with data on teacher-initiated developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive language and literacy practices. Third, regular electronic mail correspondence with other early childhood colleagues, attendance at workshops and conferences, and the co-authoring of this paper also provided outside evaluation regarding the project's practical value and theoretical strength for the fields of teacher research and early childhood education.

Project Members, Preschools, and Data Collection

We are a group of one university-based teacher researcher and three field-based teacher researchers who reflect a rich and diverse group of personal and professional interests in the field of early childhood education. Daniel Meier, the university-based researcher, works with four and five year old children from low-income, African American and Latino/a backgrounds. Evangeline Espiritu, a bilingual (English/Tagalog) teacher researcher, works with daycare teachers and two year old children at a private, corporate daycare center. Norma Villazana-Price, a bilingual (Spanish/English) teacher researcher, teaches Latino/a, African American, and Asian three to five year olds at a city college daycare center. Manuel Kichi Wong, a curriculum specialist, works with other preschool teachers of three to five year old Chinese American children at a publicly funded preschool.

Over the first few months of the project, we crystallized our research interests and common research focus that allowed flexibility for our own professional teaching interests. Under the umbrella of linking developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive teaching practices, we divided the research project into four interrelated areas of teacher inquiry:

- the role of the environment in facilitating language and literacy learning areas (Manuel)
- the influence of primary caregivers and classroom environment on the language development of nonverbal toddlers (Evangeline)
- the role of first and second language use in selected literacy activities (Norma)
- the role of cultural and linguistic resources for children's composing strategies (Daniel)

We then selected our case study children (names are pseudonyms) that we hoped would provide detailed stories and anecdotes for our respective teacher research areas listed above:

- Tammy (d.o.b. 8-22-95) and Arthur (1-5-94), for both first language is Chinese
- Jake (7-13-97), Anglo/European, first language is English; Anne (4-10-98), first language is Mandarin
- Araceli (10-18-96) and Maria (12-20-94), for both first language is Spanish
- Larry (12-16-94), African American, first language is English; Mariella (3-28-95), first language is Spanish

Windows onto Children's Lives — Revisiting Development Through Teacher Research

> Araceli, Maria, and Nyema are playing at the playdough table. As I walk by both Araceli and Maria yell out "Hi!" I smile as I reply, Hi, you three." Araceli turns to Maria and tells her, "Quiero ir afuera" (I want to go outside). Maria responds, "Yo tambien" (Me too.). They leave. A few minutes later Araceli comes back and asks Nyema, "You want to go outside?" Nyema answers, "Okay." They both run out and join Maria on the swing.

The formal structure of the project helped us sharpen our individual and collective lenses for uncovering hidden elements of children's language and actions, and provided us with new data for rethinking how we teach our young children. We offer the following data snippets to highlight our interrelated emphasis on young children's development in early childhood.

Manuel's Data Story — Classroom Environment for Literacy: I wanted to see how I could work with teachers to improve the overall classroom

environment to include learning areas focused on language and literacy. First, I met with the teachers to plan the area of the classrooms to change, design the area with maximum flexibility, grouping noisy areas and quiet areas separately, discussing a plan for implementing appropriate materials in the new areas. Second, I worked with the teachers to think of goals for changes in the environment: selection of age appropriate children's books, small group reading with children, teachers as role models for children to copy and emulate. I myself provided a role model for the teachers when I read and interacted with children in the new classroom language and literacy areas. I developed relationships with children, especially with those who benefited from the extra individual attention from an adult.

Third, I worked with teachers to develop and implement writing centers. Together, we succeeded in designing areas that support writing through: a variety of materials, teachers' encouragement of children's journals, moving books throughout different areas of the classrooms, the use of clipboards for children to draw and dictate their work and play. Fourth, I worked with Tammy and Arthur on reading and talking about books. I was initially drawn to Tammy because I had seen her older brother the year before; he was really into writing, drawing, and had a great imagination. I wondered if Tammy had the same disposition. She did in many ways — I learned to see Tammy as focused on writing and reading and staying involved with tasks. Tammy loved being read to and creating letters on paper. Since English is her second language, it took some time before Tammy spoke with me. She did so in a soft-spoken way.

Evangeline's Data Story — The Language of Toddlers: Primary caregiving is an important part of my daycare center's philosophy. Each child from infancy through preschool is assigned a primary caregiver. One of the advantages of

the primary caregiver model is that a trusting bond forms between the child and the caregiver. The model is also developmentally appropriate since it helps teachers meet children's changing developmental needs. Jake and Anne, the two children whom I observed, have been at the center since they were three months old. Jake has been with the same age group since he was an infant. Jake has formed special relationships and has a strong trusting relationship with his primary caregiver, Adrienne.

When I first began observing Jake he had just transitioned into the toddler room. Since he was transitioning into the room with the same group of children and same caregiver, Jake felt comfortable and at ease in his new room. Jake is an inquisitive child with an outgoing personality. He engages children and adults in interactions and conversations with his smile and laughter. Over the course of our project, Jake's language skills progressed from making sounds such as "da" and "ma" to words then to sentences in a short amount of time. For example, at first he would just say "Hi da!" when he greeted me in the morning. Then a few weeks later it was "Hi dandin!" From here, his early morning greeting progressed into "Hi dandelin!" until finally a month later he went on a vacation and when he came back, he greeted me with a "Hi vangelyn."

Norma's Data Story — First and Second Language Use: My preschool center is very diverse with children from many different cultures. The staff at my center is also reflective of the diversity found in San Francisco, and most staff members speak more than one language. While English is used for the most part, staff will speak to the children and their families in their home language when possible. Children are free to speak and use their home language and so first language maintenance is encouraged (Fillmore, 1989). My focal children found constant delight in having books read to them. In fact, there

were many times when the children would bring books to adults to have them read to them. Or they would join in when a book was being read to a group of children. These story readings were for the most part read in English but at some times with some adults they were read in Spanish. The focal children also participated in such literacy activities as dictating stories to adults, using stencils to attempt to write words, using markers and crayons to make pictures and to make a book.

I found that my case study children moved through the following stages of language use. The first stage appears to have been the quiet stage. This stage began when the children arrived at the center. It seems as if they knew that their home language was not the dominant one being used so they held off in speaking very much. Maria preferred to play only with children she knew she could communicate with; the children she knew spoke Spanish, too. Araceli could oftentimes be seen joining a group of children listening to a story in English and absorbing the language she was hearing (Fillmore, 1979). She would later be found reading the book by herself and attempting to use English words she made up.

In the second stage, the children would gradually use English with adults first. This was before they would attempt to use English with other children. Most communication was done by facial expressions, pointing, and having the adult ask many questions to find out what the child needed. They would go to an adult who spoke Spanish first, but if one was not available they would go to another staff member for help. In the third stage, the children would seek out adults and children who spoke English and engage in games with them. They may join a story reading group or song singing group. They may play with children that were next to them at a table. They began to use words to communicate in their second language. "Read book"

Maria would ask a teacher. "Me too?" Araceli would ask when wanting to join other children on the tire swing. At this stage, the children would use short words to get their needs met by children and adults who spoke English. The children preferred to play with children that spoke Spanish but once they reached the third stage, they would play with children who spoke English if the children were doing something they wanted to take part in.

Daniel's Data Story — Composing Strategies: The children at my preschool displayed a rich and varied repertoire of socially and culturally influenced views and orientations toward language and literacy use (Meier, 2000). I observed my case study children, Larry and Mariella, reading books, listening to books read to them, and writing and drawing in their journals and other literacy-related projects and activities. My data touches on language issues and patterns just discussed by Manuel, Evangeline, and Norma. Like Manuel's work on classroom environments for literacy, I observed the importance of changing certain elements of the environment while keeping others stable to meet the developmental needs and cultural talents of individual children. My focal student Larry loved certain books in the library where we worked, and so I always made sure that these books were on hand; conversely, I learned to vary a number of the other books to broaden Larry's interest in book browsing and reading. For example in late September, Larry delighted in reciting Brown Bear Brown Bear (Martin & Carle, 1967), enjoying its patterned language, and pointing to the cover of the book on the library wall. This was the beginning of his use of the book as a springboard for his dictation in his journal, and often couldn't stop himself and recited the entire book verbatim as his dictation. Rather than moving solely from literacy to literacy in this and many other instances, Larry moved from oral language to

literacy while all the while pulling along his oral language talents and interest in the public performance (Dyson, 1993) of these skills.

In connection with Evangeline's data, I saw how Mariella's second language (English) use started in a parallel way to Evangeline's work with toddlers' first language use: Mariella spoke in short phrases in English and then gathered steam and confidence as she formed bonds of trust in working and playing with the other children and with me. In a similar process as seen in Norma's data, Mariella moved through certain markers of first language maintenance and second language acquisition. For example, on the same late September session of Larry's dictation, Mariella and I worked on her dictation to accompany her drawing. Aware of her hesitation to use English just yet, I suggested Spanish words and phrases to accompany her drawing. Mariella nodded in agreement as I suggested (and wrote down): "Mi papa!" "Mi hermana!" "Mi amiga!" "Dos amigos." "Leah y Maria." When I read these words back to her, Mariella said "Leah y Maria" with me at the end. As with Norma's findings, Mariella's first language use connects her to literacy with other children; the draw of social relationships nurturing young children's earliest connections to first and second language and literacy use in school settings.

In another example one week later, Mariella and I sat down to do her dictation, and before I could suggest any language either in Spanish or English, another girl sitting beside us suddenly suggested "ice cream." Mariella looked at me and nodded in agreement. I extended this to "I love ice cream" and Mariella nodded her approval again. I asked about her favorite flavors, but Mariella didn't respond. I then suggested a few flavors, and Mariella replied, "I love mango," which I wrote down. The element of child-

child responsiveness, as in Norma's findings, help promote first and second language use and a comfortable journey toward literacy understanding.

Toward a Language of Collaboration — Reflections on Teacher Research in Early Childhood Education

Manuel: The benefits of our teacher research group has been the coming together and talking about language and literature. I grew these past two years in being able to understand the more complex issues of language. The inclusion of time to discuss language issues has given me more ideas at work and in having conversations with the teachers I work with. Reflecting on my part has been more internal. Time is limited but time to reflect has to be an on-going process.

Evangeline: The collaboration and the sense of community are two of the things I value most about our teacher research group. Too often teachers in the field of early childhood education work in isolation, either working merely within their classroom and not touching base with other teachers in their center or not being aware of other programs within the community that are struggling with the same issues. My co-teachers at my center were excited that I was a part of a teacher research group and wanted to find ways of extending this concept within our own center.

Norma: Step into any almost any children's center in San Francisco and you may hear one, two, possibly three languages being used by children and adults alike. With more and more families entering California speaking a different language, bilingualism has become the norm in our schools for many years. When we started this teacher research project two years ago, I welcomed the opportunity to look more closely

at second language learning in early childhood and the connections to developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive practices. This project has helped me see that in order for diversity to make sense to young children, it has to be relevant to them — relevant to their immediate world and the world they encounter at school.

Daniel: As the university/teacher researcher in the group, I learned a great deal about the challenges of putting theory into practice and putting practice into theory. And I learned this from my three colleagues in our teacher research group. The project afforded me the wonderful chance to bridge some important gaps between my professional roles as a university teacher and as a teacher researcher working with preschool-aged children. I learned valuable lessons about the need for time and space away from the busy worlds of classrooms and centers, and the power of group discussion and sharing over a long period of time. I learned too about successful ways to make closer and closer connections about young children's language and literacy development by going farther and farther afield. In other words, the group helped me see and hear more powerfully the learning of my own students through the different and removed voices and thoughts of other children, working with other adults, and playing and learning in other contexts. It has been in the mix of this "my own" and the "other" that I've grown as a university/teacher researcher.

Over the course of the past two years, our small teacher researcher group has grown closer personally and professionally. We have learned from and with each other, focusing on the children as the central stories that we have tried to tell and convey. The process has been a journey of seeing how

we as early childhood professionals can strengthen our understanding of children's language and literacy development and our own understanding of ourselves as learners. An essential part of this work has involved language itself — a "heteroglossia" (Bakhtin, 1981) of the language of Tammy's first words in English, Jake's first two-word combinations, Araceli's made-up English words for a book, and Larry's devoted recitation of a beloved book. At the same time, in a companion process of heaping language upon language in order to make sense of language itself, our project members have used our own words and phrases in our field notes, conversations, and in this paper. We learned to see our own young students in new ways by working with each other as adult learners in new ways. And this is a potentially powerful model for "seeing double" in the field of early childhood development — the language of discovery and interpretation of children as running parallel, and sometimes even along the very same track, as the language of discovery and interpretation of adults.

In this way, Araceli's made-up English words run around and around in our heads and ring in our ears as we ourselves struggle with the meaning of "developmentally appropriate practice" or "culturally responsive teaching." Child words and adult words then begin to lose their strict placement along a developmental continuum, and begin to move closer together. We can then as a teacher research group move more freely and powerfully from a four-year-old's "reading" of a children's book to a group of professionals reading an educational or literary text about language responsiveness. In the classrooms of young children, as practitioners we are often forward moving, helping children get where want them to go. Our teacher research group has provided us a forum for collaboration and sharing that allows — and often forces us — to forward and then backward and even

to the side as we try to understand what our children have been doing (and where they just might be going).

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The authors invite correspondence via our electronic mail addresses to continue the dialogue on teacher research possibilities in early childhood education.